

## 2010 HERITAGE PRESERVATION AWARDS

### Larkspur honors restoration work on two landmark buildings

History has been a civic priority in Larkspur for at least 40 years. The city government has encouraged maintenance and restoration of historic structures by creating a Heritage Preservation Board and passing ordinances that provide special treatment for work on buildings judged historically worthy. But it has been individual citizens - volunteers and building owners - who have done the work and invested the resources required to keep Larkspur's historic gems shining.

Recently two impressive restoration projects were singled out for recognition as the city awarded its first Heritage Preservation Awards to the owners of the Lark Theater and a commercial building complex at 465-467 Magnolia. The awards are to be presented annually to "recognize extraordinary accomplishments in historic preservation, " according to Richard Cunningham, chair of Larkspur's Heritage Preservation Board.

Both the Lark Theater and the 465-467 buildings serve as prime examples of the restoration art and provide impressive bookends to Larkspur's downtown district, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. "These are poster children for the restoration of downtown," commented Mayor Joan Lundstrom in presenting the awards. The projects also demonstrate the ability of determined individuals to return once-proud buildings to structural and commercial life after decades of neglect.



*Bernice Baeza, executive director of the nonprofit Lark Theater, holds the Larkspur Heritage Award presented for restoration of the Art Deco theater. Tina McArthur, at right, is board president of Lark Screensavers LLC, the community group that now owns the theater. (Jack Wilson photo)*

The Lark, one of several classic California theaters designed by architect William B. David, opened in June 1940. It went dark in the 1990s and was threatened with demolition before Bernice Baeza stepped in to start a nonprofit to restore and operate the Art Deco landmark. The onetime butcher shop completed in 1908 at 467 Magnolia and adjoining structures were suffering from dry rot and termite damage after years of deferred maintenance before H. William (Bill) Howard acquired the property in 1996. Today the Lark is thriving as a community resource for film, music, and broadcast stage and opera performances while Howard judges his years of effort and investment to have been both financially and emotionally rewarding.

Efforts to restore the Lark began in 2003 when Baeza and Heidi Hillenbrand created a nonprofit to sign a three-year lease agreement with the building's owners and began recruiting volunteers to work on the restoration. "We felt it was important to save this wonderful resource for the community," Baeza says. Construction began in January of 2004 and finished by July, thanks to the work of dozens of volunteers. Baeza credits architects (and spouses) Bruce Fullerton and Antonina Markoff, who donated their services and joined the nonprofit, and master volunteer John Gillespie, who turned out "miles and miles" of period molding and supervised the

volunteers who often worked until midnight after paid crews ended their shifts. As executive director of the nonprofit, Baeza led a successful effort to raise \$500,000 for the renovation.

When the Lark reopened in mid-2004 it had returned to its 1940s glory, with a new Art Deco frieze along three walls, refurbished original light fixtures, reproductions of the old poster cases, and reconditioned neon signage. Along the way, Baeza recalls, the team had to wrestle with problems like finding exact duplicates of the original tile, replacing worn-out seats with new but appropriate red velvet seating, and installing "invisible" doors (solid glass) to comply with historic requirements in restoring the original central box office. "People say they love to come to the theater because it brings back memories of their first movie experience," Baeza says. "Now we hope to raise a new generation that loves the movie experience."

By 2007 the Lark had attracted enough community support to justify buying the building, and donations from more than 800 individuals helped provide permanent ownership. "The community embraced the Lark renovation and purchase because it had become the focal point of downtown Larkspur, serving the entire community," says realtor Tina McArthur, who serves as board president of Lark Screensavers LLC, which now owns the building. Cunningham of the Heritage Board agrees. "The tremendous community support for this ambitious revival effort is a unique and remarkable story in which we've all participated," he says. "It certainly represents one of the most dramatic instances of restoration that benefits the public at large."



*Bill Howard registers approval for the Larkspur Heritage Award he received for his renovation of the historic building complex at 465-467 Magnolia in downtown Larkspur. The storefront building, completed in 1908, was originally a meatmarket. (Helen Heitkamp photo)*

For Bill Howard, the opportunity to restore the historic Stolzenberg butcher shop, barn and other buildings represented the fulfillment of long-held convictions about the importance of preserving and maintaining old buildings. In the mid-1970s Howard served on Larkspur's City Council and voted to create a permanent Heritage Preservation Board. Earlier, as a reserve officer in the Civil Engineer Corps of the U.S. Navy, he worked on historic buildings on Treasure Island and later developed an appreciation for proper building maintenance as an employee of Bechtel. In San Francisco, before moving to Larkspur, he had been impressed by the city's renovation of old buildings in the Barbary Coast area. "I said I'd like to do that someday," he says. "But when I bought these buildings 15 years ago and saw the shape they were in, I didn't know if I could afford it."

Work on the buildings proceeded slowly until Howard retired from his Silicon Valley job five years ago. With time to focus on the project, Howard began working with the California Office of Historic Preservation to

develop a master plan that would qualify the work for a federal tax credit. He also made use of Larkspur's former ReStore program providing below-market-rate loans for work on buildings contributing to the district's status on the National Register. And the project benefited from special building code treatment under the city's heritage ordinance.

According to Larkspur Past & Present, the history and walking tour currently being revised by the Heritage Preservation Board, Howard has achieved a "meticulous" reconstruction and restoration of the building erected more than a century ago by Hugo and Sophia Stolzenberg. "This project represents a thoroughgoing restoration, rather than simply maintenance, of old structures," Cunningham notes. 1960s-era brick facing was removed from the storefront, which was rebuilt to match early photographs. Asbestos shingles, probably applied in the 1950s, were removed, and the underlying original v-channel siding restored. A recent paint job highlights the band of tooth-like "dentils" outlining the faÇade and provides a colorful contribution to the downtown cityscape.

Howard has taken an extra step to highlight the history of the building complex, originally a meat and fruit retail storefront with a barn where cattle were kept and slaughtered. He has preserved memorabilia from Larkspur's early days in a "history box" on the side of the former butcher shop displaying artifacts found in the old buildings - plus the plaque honoring the restoration that was presented to Howard by the City Council. In accepting the award, Howard commented that he hopes the recognition "can serve as an incentive to other landowners to take on the challenge of restoring and maintaining our downtown."

*(This story was written by Jack Wilson and first appeared in the Twin Cities Times)*